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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: KWARA STATE MOVING IN RIGHT DIRECTION
UNDER SARAКИ'S LEADERSHIP

REF: 2006 LAGOS 01361

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Cheryl Fernandes for reasons
1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Kwara State Governor Bukola Saraki appears to be a popular governor who is trying to diversify his state's economy and foster religious tolerance, although his domination of state politics at every level is leaving little room for a viable political opposition. The Governor's creation of a committee of non-partisan, Muslim and Christian religious leaders tasked with proposing solutions to religious-based disagreements in the state capital of Ilorin has helped prevent potential conflicts from escalating. His attempts to kick start commercial farming in Kwara by encouraging 13 Zimbabwean farmers to start farming ventures is progressing, albeit very slowly and in spite of significant infrastructure hurdles. The political opposition and the Christian Association of Nigeria's one complaint against the current administration was that the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) completely controls the State Assembly and the 16 local government areas (LGAs), effectively quashing opposition voices in Kwara. In fact, ruling government officials touted their total control of the political environment as the key to Kwara's stability. The following cable assesses the current political and religious environment in Kwara state based on Poloffs meetings with civil society groups, religious leaders, political opposition, and government officials during a trip to Ilorin from 27 to 30 January. END SUMMARY.

THE SARAKIS: CONTROLLING STATE POLITICS

¶2. (C) The Governor's father, Olusola Saraki, and his party, the PDP, dominate politics in Kwara state at every level and will, in the opinion of most of those we spoke to, handpick a successor for Governor Saraki when his term ends in 2011. PDP officials control every seat in the State Assembly and the chairmanship of all 16 LGAs; only one opposition party, the Action Congress (AC), managed to win one ward out of almost 200 in 2007. Although two opposition parties, the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) and the Democratic People's Party (DPP), claimed the opposition was uniting to field one candidate for governor in 2011, a DPP member conceded they had "no hope" of scraping together an electoral win as most of their supporters had decamped to the ruling party. The State Chairman of the PDP also told Poloffs it was "very hard for the opposition to win." COMMENT: The Saraki family has

long controlled Kwara State and there was little opposition to Governor Saraki's 2007 run for a second term, due in part to his family's dominance of politics and in part to the positive dividends the citizens of Kwara State have seen from his policies. END COMMENT.

13. (C) The two opposition parties which met with Poloffs, the DPP and the ANPP, were irate about the Governor's dominance of politics, but they did not articulate a competing vision or party ideology. Their primary complaint was that the Governor had persuaded the State Assembly to pass a law in 2004 permitting the state to funnel federal funds designated for the 16 LGAs into a state-controlled "capital project account." The DPP and ANPP officials said the state government only gave the LGAs enough money to cover salaries and other maintenance costs, leaving them little money for development projects. Both opposition parties said that three LGA chairmen who had criticized this plan had been removed. The Governor's Chief of Staff Ladi Hassan and the Chairman of the State PDP confirmed the opposition's accusation, telling Poloffs they "cannot allow the LGAs to operate on their own" because the level of incompetence and corruption at the local level compelled them to seize control of the federal funds designated for the LGAs. As a result, the Governor had set up a joint account to which both the LGAs and the state contributed; the LGA could propose development projects for the Governor's approval.

UP KWARA: THE STATE MOTTO IN ACTION

14. (C) Apart from the opposition's objections, most other

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contacts spoke positively of the current State administration, largely because they perceived the Governor was leading the state in the right direction. A professor of political science at Ilorin University claimed the Saraki family filled a leadership vacuum which few in the state had the capacity to do, and "godfatherism" could ensure a degree of stability with the right godfather. For example, he was confident the elder Saraki would pick a successor for his son in 2011 that would continue to implement the Governor's economic reforms. The Chairman of the PDP in Kwara also credited the "state of harmony"--which is also the tag on the state's license plate--to his party's control of state politics and the lack of a viable opposition.

15. (C) The Governor's Chief of Staff Ladi Hassan told Poloffs Governor Saraki wooed manufacturers to Ilorin using tax breaks. Poloffs drove through the industrial zone and observed several factories including one owned by Dangote and another by Jincheng. Hassan said Dangote also planned to build a cement factory in Kwara State. A professor of political science at Ilorin University said the Governor was trying to establish a Kwara State University in Malete and improve the capacity of the airport in Ilorin to handle large cargo shipments. Poloffs arrived just after a new electrical transmission station was put online, partly with state funds, to improve Ilorin's capacity to obtain electricity from the national grid. This level of economic development might be difficult to sustain in the current global economic downturn; Hassan said the state government planned to issue a 30 billion naira bond (approximately \$205 million) to finance a budget shortfall for 2008.

COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: A ROLE MODEL FOR THE NATION?

15. (C) Governor Saraki's creation of a 18-member religious committee, composed of an equal number of non-partisan and well-respected Muslims and Christians, to rule on religious-based complaints has proven highly effective in resolving conflicts before they escalate, according to the committee members, civil society groups, and several government officials. Muslim leader and committee member Honorable Justice Ambali (retired) said the committee met once a month to hear cases ranging from Muslim public address

systems disturbing neighbors to the construction of a church on a residential plot. The committee lacked a means of enforcing its rulings, but it derived its authority from the Governor's endorsement and the reputation of the committee members, according to Ambali. Both Ambali and a Christian committee member touted as one of their achievements two seminars they organized--one held prior to the 2007 elections and one held after--to educate candidates and later elected officials on their responsibility to assuage religious-related conflict. The committee's efforts are centered on Ilorin; the potential for religious strife in the countryside is more limited due to marriages between Christians and Muslims. One ANPP representative told Poloffs that it was hard to find families outside of Ilorin that did not include both Muslim and Christian members.

16. (C) The reports of the Governor's efforts to advocate religious harmony are consistent with his own background. Saraki is a Muslim Yoruba, who has been given the honorific title of the Turaki of Ilorin, but the Governor's mother and wife are both Christians, according to one of Saraki's special assistants Babatunde Morakinyo. Morakinyo also told Poloff on 15 January that Saraki is careful to start official meetings with a Muslim prayer and end with a Christian one.

COMMERCIAL FARMING OFF TO A SLOW START

17. (C) While the Governor's Chief of Staff and his aides heralded the Zimbabwean farmers' project as a resounding success, one of the farmers Poloff interviewed in Shonga painted a less optimistic picture of halting progress. As part of the Governor's efforts to kick-start commercial farming in Kwara, he allocated 1,000 hectares to 13 Zimbabwean farmers in 2004 (Ref A), creating the Shonga commercial farm settlement located in the Kwara North Senatorial District close to the Niger River. Despite

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abundant arable land and the Governor's support, one of the farmers claimed endemic corruption, a lack of irrigation, and Nigerian banks' reluctance to give long-term loans was hampering progress. For example, the farmer said he had to cultivate cassava because the irrigation system he was promised in 2004 still has not been established, making it impossible to grow rice, which he said would be far more profitable. The dairy processing facility planned in 2006 is almost online and already producing yogurt, but corruption delayed its establishment for almost two years. Customs officials would not allow the dairy cows ordered for the processing facility to enter the country unless the farmers paid a "tax" that equated to the money they had reserved for establishing the facility. The Zimbabwean farmers also said it was difficult to generate enough capital to start projects because Nigerian banks were wary of issuing long-term loans.

18. (C) COMMENT: While Governor Saraki appears committed to developing Kwara State economically and encouraging religious tolerance, his domination of state politics gives short shrift to state institutions and makes state politics personality based -- an all too common occurrence in Nigeria. Although most contacts had faith in the elder Saraki's ability to select a competent successor when his son's term expires in 2011, the fact that the political system in Kwara State is constructed around one family threatens the ability of the state's institutions to grow in their independence and weather leadership transitions. That said, Kwara State remains a state to watch and has the potential to serve as an example of progressive leadership for other states.

19. (U) This cable was coordinate with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS